

# National Imprisonment and Crime Rates Continue to Fall

Crime dropped faster in 2015 in states with larger prison declines

Over the five-year period from 2010 to 2015, the nation's imprisonment rate fell 8.4 percent while the combined violent and property crime rate declined 14.6 percent, according to statistics released by the U.S. Department of Justice.<sup>1</sup> Thirty-one states cut both rates simultaneously.

The rates of violent and property crime reported to law enforcement both have declined by more than half since their 1991 peaks, returning to levels not seen since the late 1960s.<sup>2</sup> National, state, and local crime rates shift for complex and poorly understood reasons, but experts believe that the long-term decline is the result of a combination of factors, including more effective policing, the waning of the crack cocaine epidemic, the spread of car theft-prevention devices and other anticrime technologies, reduced use of cash in favor of electronic payments, and increased incarceration of high-risk offenders.

## States show tandem reductions in crime, prisons

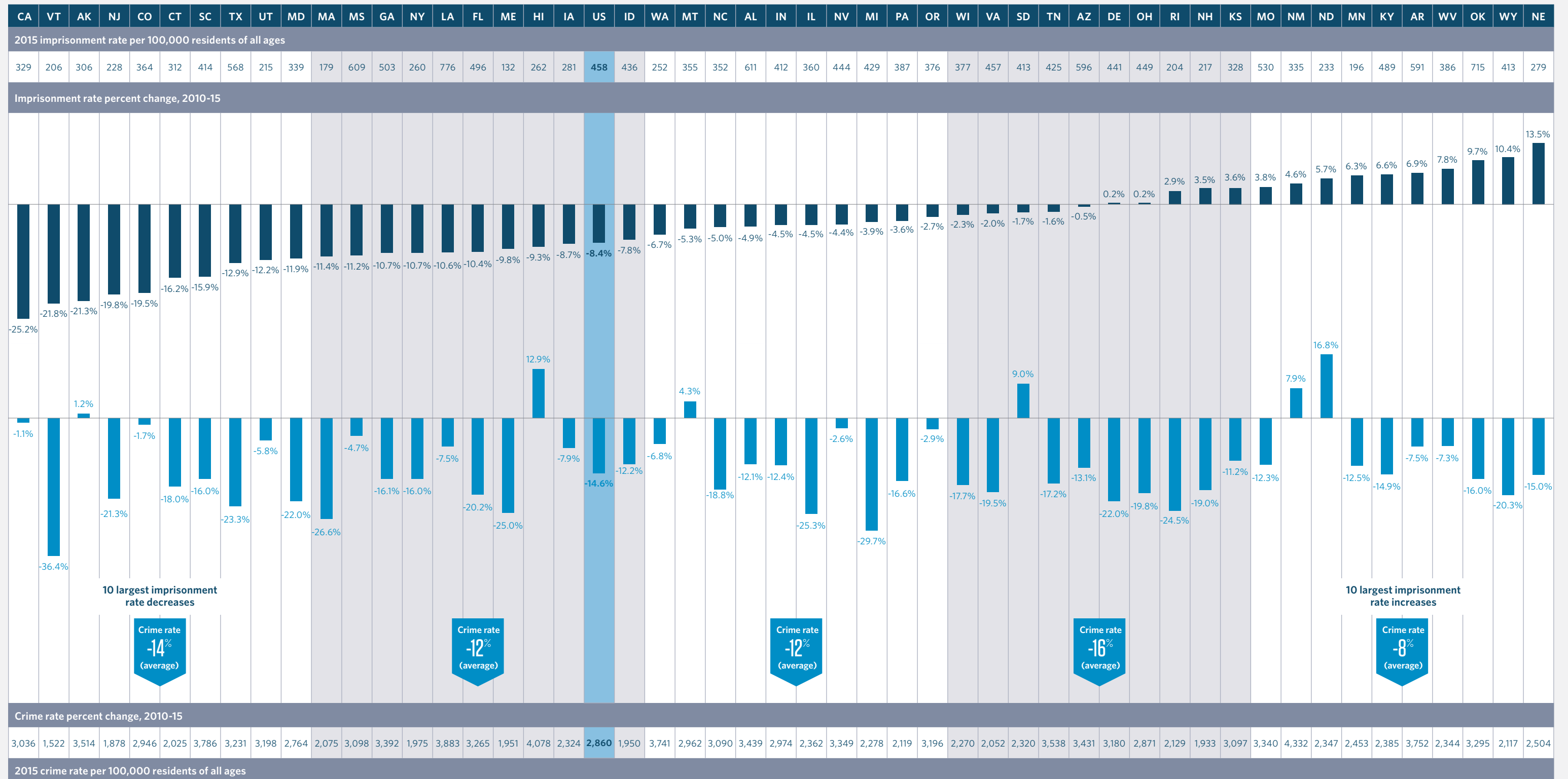
Table 1 below ranks states by their imprisonment-rate trends over the past five years and shows that 35 states reduced their imprisonment rates, led by California. The table also documents crime-rate changes for each state, showing that almost every state experienced a reduction in crime, with no apparent correlation to its trend in imprisonment:

- Across the 44 states with crime declines, imprisonment-rate changes ranged from a 25.2 percent decrease to a 13.5 percent increase.
- Crime trends were consistent across both the 35 states where imprisonment dropped and the 15 states where it increased.
- In the 10 states with the largest imprisonment declines, the crime rate fell an average of 14.4 percent, compared with 8.1 percent in the 10 states with the biggest growth in imprisonment.

The lack of a consistent relationship between the crime and imprisonment trends reinforces the findings of the National Research Council and others that the imprisonment rate in many states and the nation as a whole has long since passed the point of diminishing public safety returns.<sup>3</sup>

# States Cut Imprisonment and Crime Over 5 Years

Latest data reveal little relationship between recent changes in rates



Notes: Imprisonment and crime rates are per 100,000 residents of all ages. Imprisonment rates count inmates sentenced to more than a year in prison and do not reflect jail populations. The U.S. imprisonment rate includes federal prisoners and excludes those held in local jails. Crime rates reflect Part I offenses as defined by the FBI's Uniform Crime Report and combine violent and property crimes; 2015 violent crime rates use the legacy (not revised) definition of rape.

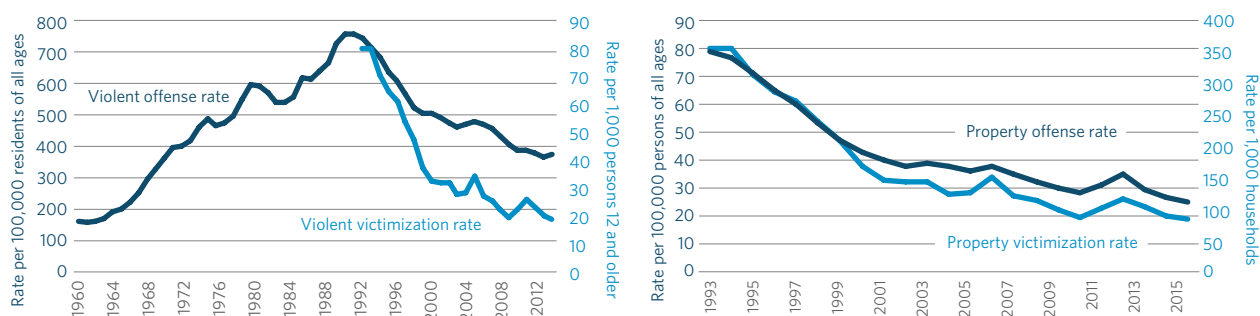
Sources: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Prisoners series, 2010-15; FBI, Crime in the United States series, 2010-15

## 2 crime measures show dramatic long-term declines

Each year, two federal agencies measure crime in the United States: The FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program aggregates offenses reported to law enforcement agencies, and the Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Crime Victimization Survey obtains data from about 160,000 people in 90,000 households. The survey complements the UCR by collecting information on crimes not reported to the police. According to the UCR, the violent crime rate rose 3.1 percent during 2015, although it was still half what it was when it peaked in 1991.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the victimization survey found that the violent crime rate dropped during 2015, though by a statistically insignificant amount, to just a quarter of 1993 levels.<sup>5</sup> The survey captures data on a broader range of violent crimes than the UCR, which may partially explain this discrepancy. The UCR reported a rise in the murder rate in 2015, but the increase was concentrated in a number of large cities. Leading criminologists posit that the rise could be the result of growing heroin and prescription opioid markets, strained relationships between police and residents in some communities, or other local factors.<sup>6</sup> For property crime, the UCR rate fell 3.4 percent from 2014 to 2015, down more than 50 percent since its peak in 1991. The victimization survey also recorded a statistically significant decline of 4.4 percent in 2015, falling to less than a third of its 1993 high.

### Police Reports, Victim Surveys Capture Complementary Crime Trends

Both measures find decades-long drops in violent, property crimes



Sources: FBI, Crime in the United States series, 1960-2015; Bureau of Justice Statistics, Criminal Victimization series, 1993-2015

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## Endnotes

- 1 E. Ann Carson, "Prisoners in 2015," Bureau of Justice Statistics (December 2016), <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p15.pdf>; FBI, Crime in the United States series, 2010-15, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/ucr-publications>.
- 2 FBI, Crime in the United States series, 1960-2015.
- 3 National Research Council, *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States* (National Academies Press, Washington, D.C., 2014).
- 4 FBI, Crime in the United States series, 2015, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2015/crime-in-the-u.s.-2015>.
- 5 Jennifer L. Truman and Rachel E. Morgan, "Criminal Victimization, 2015," Bureau of Justice Statistics (October 2016), <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv15.pdf>.
- 6 Richard Rosenfeld, "Documenting and Explaining the 2015 Homicide Rise: Research Directions," National Institute of Justice (June 2016), <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/249895.pdf>.

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